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***Changes in argument structure: Developments in
impersonal constructions since Late Middle English. A
preliminary corpus-based study***

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Abbreviated version

As its title reveals, this MA dissertation is concerned with the later stages of English impersonal constructions. Examples (1)-(3) illustrate some of the impersonal constructions examined:

- (1) *norþan **sniwde***
from north snowed-3SG
'it snowed from the north' [OE Sea 0008 (31); quoted from Möhlig-Falke 2012: 8]
- (2) *Me **liketh** nat to lye*
me-OBJ pleases-3SG not to lie
'I do not like to lie' [MED c1425(a1420) Lydg. *TB* (Aug A.4) 4.1815]
- (3) *ðætte oft ðone geðyldegestan **scamað** ðæs siges*
that often the most patient-ACC feels shame-3SG the victory-GEN
'so that often the most patient one is ashamed of the victory' [OE CP (Cotton) 0074 (33.226.18); quoted from Möhlig-Falke 2012: 7]

Morphosyntactically, these constructions share the characteristic that they contain a finite verb inflected for the third person singular, but lack a subject marked for the nominative case controlling verb agreement. In English, the impersonal construction has been lost, having been replaced by personal patterns with a nominative subject (e.g. ME *hym nedde* '[there] was need [to] them' > ModE *they needed*) or by syntactic patterns with an expletive non-referential subject ('dummy *it*'): OE *sniwde* 'snowed' > ModE *it snowed*), among others.

Classic analyses of the historical development of the impersonal construction, such as Jespersen (1961[1927]: 208-210), Lightfoot (1979, 1991), Fischer & van der Leek (1983) and Allen (1995), have tended to establish a direct correlation between the loss of the construction and the profound morphosyntactic changes that took place in English over the Old and Middle English periods. More recent analyses, such as Möhlig-Falke (2012), have approached the construction primarily from a cognitive-functional perspective, focusing on its perspectival function and its connections with the middle voice, as described by Kemmer (1993). Finally, work by Trousdale (2008) has pointed to the possible connection between the demise of the impersonal construction and the large-scale readjustment of the taxonomy of the English transitive construction, which resulted in "a wider range of subject types [and] a wider range of thematic relations between the verb and its arguments" (Trousdale 2008: 311).

In the light of the previous literature on the topic, this dissertation has been structured

as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the impersonal construction, including a discussion on the terminological maze surrounding the field (§2.1). Section 2.2 clarifies the notion of impersonal construction adopted in this research, and sketches the main constructional patterns available in OE. The function or functions most commonly attributed to the impersonal construction in earlier English, and the intimately related notion of transitivity, are the concern of §2.3. Section 3 then provides an overview of the development of the English impersonal construction and of the relevant literature from Jespersen (1961[1927]) to Allen (1986, 1995) (§3.1). Section 3.2 addresses in particular the recent accounts by Trousdale (2008), Möhlig-Falke (2012), and Miura (2015), which in a sense move away from classical interpretations. In the light of the preceding discussion, §4 and §5 outline, respectively, the aims of this research, and the methodology adopted in order to achieve those aims. A corpus-based study of two impersonal verbs, namely *like* (< OE *lician*) and *please* (< Anglo-Norman *plaiser*, *pleser*) is presented in §6. The discussion of data and findings is undertaken in §7, and finally, §8 offers some concluding remarks as well as some suggestions for further research.

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